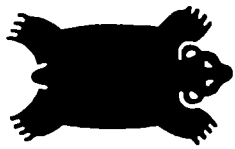

DINNER

"You two eats too fast!"

Mari's voice jumps across delicious, steamy plates of food. She has fiber in her voice. "I can't concentrate on the tastes when you do that," she scolds.

She forks a tender mushroom, dripping butter, then grins disarmingly at Josh.

Josh lives in the studio next door to mine. We often share meals. We lived together for ten years—eight of those years we were married. We were separated for a year before I met Mari. We might still be living together if it were up to him. However, I finally had to end a way of living that left me confused and exhausted. I felt dishonest, still sharing quarters with him after becoming lovers with women.

Josh had cooked Mari's favorite meal: steak, mushrooms, potatoes and broccoli. We pawed the table, similar to mine—a huge spool that once held telephone cable—ravenous as dogs.

Now she leans towards me with a coy look. "Cut my beefs," she says.

"I'm not your mother, toots. Cut up your own food."

And there goes Josh—all concentration centered on the little broccoli trees and whole garlic cloves slicked in olive oil. I'd better get my share quick!

I've tried to convince them both to become born again vegetarians. It hasn't worked. Josh is a devoted meat eater, who loves vegetables. "What's the big deal?" he asks. "Do I have to

love one or the other?" Mari, on the other hand, assures me she will become a vegetarian for economic as much as health reasons when she returns to Argentina. Only in this country can she afford meat, because other people can afford to buy it for her.

"I am so happiest here, Mari and Josh," she croons, hot potato and cold sour cream sliding down her throat. Good, now that she's not dishing out any more orders I can get into my food.

"Mari, don't say 'happiest.' Just say 'I'm so happy here.'" Josh loves to instruct her, at anything.

"I'm so uglies here," she retorts, showing a funny face and rolling eyes.

"No, Mari, say 'I'm so ugly here," he says.

Ordinarily he doesn't let anything come between himself and good food. His body shape seems to change when he eats; tall, slender and relaxed, in front of food he thickens and tenses. Fierce tunnel vision occurs. He must really love Mari; he enjoys her company at all times. Still I just know that bits of meat and potato are going to end up scattered in his salt and pepper bush of a beard. He is still dear to me.

"Youse not uglies, Josh. Youse is beautiful to me." She looks like an adorable child. I'm not jealous either. Her sexual passion lies with me. I want them to have fun together.

He says, "No, Mari, that isn't the way you say it. You have to say, 'I feel ugly' not 'I'm so uglies.' "

This is one of her favorite words. Today his pedantry challenges some good conversations between us. I tense up whenever he corrects her. Maybe because he seemed to speak to her as if she were a child, the one we never had together.

"So who's feeling ugly, meine kindele?" I ask. "Mari's having a great time with her Norte Americanos. Right, Mari?"

"I am so happy we is together," she responds.

Half of one of her front teeth is missing; she pushes her tongue through the gap and gurgles, dispelling my attempt to make her a grownup.

"*Are* together, Mari. You use *is* for a single person. She *is* happy. But they *are* happy." Josh is a patient teacher.

They do seem like father and child to me. I want my mature, South American lover back, but I am glad they get along so well.

"She is happy when the threes of us are together," she coos.

"Hey, I like that 'she' business, Mari," I say. "Did you know I started to write stories about myself in the third person? Not to make myself generic, but to get some distance, some perspective on it all. Using 'I' seems so limited, especially since my 'I' is always changing. When I use 'she' as the protagonist I can feel myself expanding."

"Why don't you give names to the 'shes' and expand your point of view to those of other people. That's what fiction writers do," Josh says.

"I'm too concerned at how my 'shes' see the world at this point in my life, thanks," I say.

"Oh, Judith. That's why I love you so much. Sometimes you have the expression of a leetle baby," Mari looks at me affectionately. "You seem to enjoy to talk with your face as much as with the words. And you give New York City so many expressions for me. And yet you can't to escape some of your peculiarities—how you whine sometimes, like cry when you don't get what you want. Like you get all nervous and tense. Like a so leetle kitten wanting mama."

Josh nods in agreement with her.

"Well, maybe you're right. But I'm not the only leetle kid here. Sometimes being with the two of you makes me tense. I mean three is not an easy combination. It reminds me too much of mother, father, child. Four is an easier combination. I don't know." My hand tightens around the cold wine glass.

"Judith, the true is that there is a lot of tension between you two. Sometimes I think you would both be more comfortable if you didn't live next door to each other. Seems like you're both cryin' alot with each other." She is picking up some of my expressions, like *alot.*

My smile disappears. My hand tightens more. Mari's smart. But I just can't let go of him and all those years we shared struggling together to make change. He is still family for me. He has replaced my blood brother. We have struggled to go beyond the

prejudices of our childhoods. We do speak a language that tries to consider significant others, many significant others.

"Judith, what you thinkin'?" Mari's directness always startled me.

"I...I was still thinking about how I like to talk about myself in the third person. It gets me away from myself in a helpful way. Like taking a walk away from my house clears up my thinking.

"Remember Josh, when we lived in Vermont—remind me, Mari, to tell you about the time a guy we let stay with the theater collective in the country asked if he could cook dinner for us all. Dinner turned out to be the legs of all my frog friends from our pond. I thought I would kill him. But I'm not going to tell you at the dinner table—anyway, Josh, are you listening? I used to walk into the hills in back of the house so I could see it from a distance and reflect on all the heavy stuff we were always going through with each other. It really helped."

"Is that why you disappeared all the time, babe?" Josh slides a fat baked potato on my plate. He seems to be done eating already. "But it sounds funny, pretentious, to talk about 'she'."

"Well, we can't all think like you do, peanut head," I say. He moves away when I try to snatch part of a broccoli tree from his beard. "But I really don't want to argue with you, Josh, so let's change the topic. Does anyone want some tea?"

"I'll have some peppermint. How about some maté, Mari? Judith got some for you. Didn't you, Judith?" He reaches for the after dinner cigar in his shirt pocket. "You know, babe," a sly grin creeps across his face, "did you ever consider that you might have trouble saying 'I' because you're a double header?"

"Thanks, sweetheart, but I've thought of it maybe a million times. But this is one time my eccentricity can't be summed up by your double talk and, please, leave my sister, Meredith, out of this."

"Would it matters to you both if I just keeps drinking the red wine I brought for our dinner?" As she speaks, Mari tips her wine glass to her lips, not waiting for a reply.

"You drink it, Mari, so Judith doesn't drink any more. *She's* had enough. *She's* already slurring her words."

"Josh, you're not my father!" My resolution not to be testy with him flies out the window. "I'll decide how much I can drunk. Oh fuck it! Now I can't talk straight. It's all your fault, Josh."

"That's because you already had three glasses, Judith. I saw you." A stream of cigar smoke comes at me.

"You're not my watchdog."

"See," he retorts. "You always get nasty when you drink."

"But you're egging me on, Josh."

"Stoppits. Stoppits. Josh, Judith can pick if she wants more wine or not." Mari hands me her half-full glass of wine.

"Thanks for defending me, Mari. Does anyone want some tea? Well, I'm going to put the water on anyway."

As I head for the sink Josh sings out, "Picture me upon your knees. Tea for three and three to tease...." He stops suddenly, overcome by some thought.

Was he thinking, "When am I going to find a woman to be close to again?" Maybe Mari is right. Maybe I should move far away from him so he can feel free to start over again without me, so I can stop worrying about him.

Just as suddenly his face lights up.

"Oh, meine dearest kindele," he exclaims.

"Josh, how can you be so silly when you've hardly had any wine?" My voice cracks. "It's like you're high without needing to take anything. Isn't he?"

"He is so beautiful. I loves him so much," Mari responds.

I reach for the tea kettle.

"You know, Judith, when you say you like to call yourself a 'she' instead of an 'I', and think of yourself as different people, some peoples would say you were like crazy, like schizophrenics. Everybody else in your country is so much into the 'I' generation." We all laugh.

"I do. I can't help it if I feel like different people at different times. Doesn't everybody? By the way Mari, honey, you use she all the time. Who says, 'The rock she is hard and the boy she is funny?' That cracks me up."

"Don't be upsets with me. I understand perfectly. I like your differently people. I never get bor-ed with you."

"So there you are! I'm a fascinating'she'. You know, Mari, you really surprise me. You use more four syllable words in English than my friends do. Where did you learn fancy, shrink jargon?"

"The Chicano people I stay with in California used that word alot. They know all them words: schizophrenic, paranoia, neurotica, because when they go to a clinics and say they is upset, the doctors throw these words on them to confuse them and make them think to be something funny with themselves. Not with them government and oppressive system. Believe me, Judith, I know what you are talking about. So they go away and buys Jack Daniels and drinks and drinks until they catch it. Until they knows what's being done to them. The injusticia done to them make them felt and act loco, like crazies people and then they is handcuff and told they is eschizophrenics."

I say, "It's all fucked up. Have some more wine with me? A schizophrenic society breeds schizophrenic citizens. The government actually thinks it's doing good by preserving Native Americans on reservations. Imagine, first they take away their land and then they parcel it back with all kinds of constraints. No wonder people withdraw when they can't take the reality that's dished out to them; it becomes a necessity to invent different behaviours for different occasions.

"You become different people too, Josh, when you smoke and eat. Could I interrupt your cigar meditación and ask you to pass me the broccoli? Por favor?"

Josh points to my wine glass and shakes his head no. I have to retrieve the broccolli myself.

Mari says, "It's important to keep clear, Judith, that your use of 'she' instead of 'I' is so conscious mechinism to express the ways you experience the reality; it is very different than the eschizophrenic who are not in control—possible because of chemical imbalance or hereditary assault."

"I know, Mari, but sometimes I'm not sure I am in charge of what I do. Life lives us too. And sometimes I think, well, maybe it's true."

"What?" Josh sends puffs of smoke rings in my direction,

"That you really do drink too much wine?"

"Stop sticking pins into me, Josh. You know what I mean. Maybe I am a bit of a multi-person. Don't forget, I was born double. But so what? At least I can keep track of them."

"I wish you women would see me as a multiple personality," Josh says. "I can't stand it when you talk about men as if we were all alike. That's what happened in the theater group. Katie started the plot to get everyone to hate me, because I was a man. That's true isn't it?"

"Well, in a way it was. But we had to become stronger on our own. Maybe you were too helpful; that doesn't work either."

"You should write a story about that," he adds.

"I have to write my own story first," I say.

"You can explain things sometimes better in art; show different viewpoints at the same time. But I think you have to change that story where you used 'she' all the time. It sounded funny. You can't go around talking about yourself like that. At least use 'I' sometimes."

"So, Josh, do you make all the rules here? No wonder I get you mixed up with my mother. You both have it all worked out what you can and can't do. You are both very strong-willed people. Every time I express myself to her, she ends up telling me I'm vulgar. And everytime I try to talk to you, you think I'm nuts. I think I'm just telling it like it is. For a radical, you can be so conservative. I really think that if you were homosexual or even bisexual you would know more what I'm talking about."

"Don't play games with yourself, Judith. The important thing as an artist is—are you communicating with as many people as possible."

"I think homosexual artists bend backwards trying to communicate to other people, to not offend others. We don't have set behavior rules to go by like you heteros do. We have to make up our rules as we go along."

"Hetero-smetero, you know what I mean. Stop acting dumb. You know the difference between a literary gimmick and getting at the truth don't you?"

"Truth-smuth. Everybody's got their own damn truth. Here,

do you want this ashtray for that disgusting cigar?"

"Stoppits! Stoppits! I can't stand when you fights." Mari's eyes flash.

"Besides, it's not even grammatically correct, and no one would understand you." He very carefully grinds the lit end of the cigar into the shell that serves as ashtray until no more fire remains then places the half-smoked cigar inside the shell. "I'm going to smoke the rest when I have some solitude."

Mari does look upset. "We use that same word, *vulgar*, that your mother thinks you, Judith. But what means it to you?"

"Oh, something like ignorant, coarse."

"I thought so, but to us it mean also something quite different. For us it can mean something positive that comes from the people or something used by the working-class peoples. It doesn't have to have derogatory meaning. But what means grammatesicle?"

"Granma's testicle?" Josh grins. "Granma doesn't have a testicle. Only granpa does." He laughs too loudly.

"Josh, could you please pass me the plate of meat?"

I offer some to Mari and say. "Ever notice how often men like to tell jokes about their pricks and balls? No sense of decorum. And listen, Joshua, it's gross to laugh so hard at your own jokes. Mari, Josh said grammatically, you know, rules of grammar."

"You both upsets me, so I can't to hear you no more." Mari says.

"It's gross to chew with your mouth open, Judith," Josh says. "I'm glad it wasn't me who took the last piece."

"Oh, Josh, let's not needle each other. It's tiring. Come on. I want to tell you both something. I just know; no matter what happens, I'll always love you both as my brother and sister."

Mari sends me a knowing look. It must be disgusting to have to watch Josh and me go at each other.

"Your mama and papa must have been cruel to each other at the dinner table, Judith," Mari says.

"Why do you say that, Mari?"

"I just feel that you are repeating a pattern in your memory.

Or you wouldn't do that. You are like some kind of family I never had—where I could be as close to both you. So I don't want to hear the whining no more."

The three of us settle into our own spaces, not looking at one another.

"You know, Mari..." I pause, self-conscious about breaking the silence—her observation had hit home, "...that's very interesting about the word vulgar. How in English it means something offensive, obscene, like crude or not nice. You know, like common people are crude sometimes. I must say I'm glad I'm a liberal vegetarian. This meat is too delicious. You really are a good cook, honey."

Josh seems pleased with my compliment but Mari sends me annoyed looks. "Judith, didn't you hear me say we use the word vulgar too? But like I say, have often a positive sense for us. Depend how you use it. That last statement you say sounds pigoted to me. The common people aren't crude! Rich peoples is crude and cruel."

Josh and I have really gotten to her. "You mean bigoted, Mari," Josh corrects.

"Wait. Let me look up *vulgar* in the dictionary," I say.

"Judith is always running to the dictionary. Eat your food first, babe. Aren't you going to eat all of your potato? The only time you get into food is when you're afraid I'm cheating you. Right?"

"I'm finished. I'll save the rest of my potato for tomorrow. Where's your dictionary? Your desk needs a once-over. How can you think with it like this?"

"Judith is always saving bits of food for tomorrow," Josh says. He takes the plates to the small sink just behind the table. "Did you take a good look in the refrigerator? How many little wrapped up tidbits did you count? That's all the food she is saving for tomorrow."

"Josh, we can't all be as perfect about food as you are. Maybe I was a Central Park squirrel once. Frugality can be seen as a virtue, you know. Come on, sit down, Mari and I'll clean up. You did all the cooking. Listen, here's what the dictionary says:

Vulgar. One. Of or associated with the common people. Two. Vernacular. What does that mean? I forgot."

"It mean the language that is spoken dailys by the people of a country rather than the literary or learned language," Mari answers. "Remember to you that I have been translating English poetry for a few years now, and one of the black women's poetry I translated was written in the vernacular. The way the black peoples talk and that's very difference than writing in poet literary tradition. I know a lot about the English language from my translation work, but I just don't know yet how to speak it well."

"You do great, Mari." She must think I'm a jerk sometimes. My middle class upbringing is showing again; I was taught that common people, in other words poor people, were crude.

She looks past me, eyes wide, glistening.

"You will come with me, Judith, to the Pampa someday and you will begin to speak Spanish immediato. I promet you. You have a good listen. And that's what it takes is a good listen."

"Yes, I have a good ear, two good ears." I pull on one of my ears and on one of hers. "But, maybe my listen needs improvement."

"Do that to me too," Josh says. He tears off a chunk of Italian bread and wipes up the meat juices left on his plate before devouring it.

I pull on his ears too.

Mari must feel so lonely with Josh and me—her pose as a child fumbling with a new language is in part just that, a pose; maybe she uses it to accomodate us or to distract us from our constant bantering. She's really a brilliant clown.

"Judith, here, read the rest of the definition of vulgar." Josh gives full attention to the conversation again.

"Three. ill-bred, boorish. Four. obscene, offensive, coarse," I continue.

Josh intervenes. "I think, Judith, that those are the more common uses of the word here. Not the first two definitions you read."

"I know. I already said that."

"I tell you, it's from the Latin, *Vulgus,* the common people,"

Mari insists.

"It's amazing how desultory the order of definitions for a word seem," I comment. "Of course, we are assured the most common usage is first. But by whose research and for what purposes? I'm beginning to smell racist, sexist, and classist forces at work in lexicography."

"I comes from the common people," Mari announces, "and I am not obscene, what you say, coarse? Not nice? I am very, very nice. I am not durtie. I use toilet paper and teeth paste." Her cute grin becomes a grimace.

"Mari, forgive me. I was just speaking from bad habit to say common people are crude. It was stupid. Come on, forgive me. I see now. Vulgar means of the common people, the community, the common good. I can learn."

"Common also means widespread, as in 'common knowledge,' and 'common ground,' " Josh offers. "And let's see it also is used to mean average or standard like, "His grades were common, ordinary.'"

"Right, Josh, *his* grades were common, while *her* grades were exceptional." I pat his head.

"So Mari.... " He ignores me. "Common means ordinary, everyday, like in common sense."

"Yes, Josh," Mari replies solicitously. "But I can see that here in your middle class sectors, vulgar is used more in an oppressive, classist, put down way—mean like stupid, coarse. You people would think my Indian people is vulgar...." She looks at me. "...like ignorant, because they eat with them hands. But to me is beautiful."

"That's unfair, Mari. I love to eat with my hands and you know it. How do you say common in Spanish?"

"Comun. El comun de las gentes. The majority of the people. The average peoples."

"Judith, could you do something ordinary like make us tea before the water boils away?" asks Josh.

* * *

Julio 18 en Argentina at House of my Family

Te amo, Judith. All the birds of the Pampas sing sweet and sad today about us, about space and emptiness. About different times where Judith or Mari are crying in Foreign nights.

But I can hear also our laughs. I can hear your marimba fully of music of life. Your marimba loving me, your marimba sucking like a child from mother earth and mother sky. Your marimba playing with ferns and sweet worms and clouds and so far away stars. Your marimba and you galloping flying swimming.

I'm here to visit my family again, but I cannot work in my family house. To have a family is such a terrible thing. I love them as horrible much and I cannot do nothing for them . And guilty and impotence are coming back again, like the years ago. Now I can see somethings clearly but I cannot change the feelings, the pain.

Did I ever say to you how it was the first time I came here after to leave you when I come back from Europe. I found my father and sister waiting me at the railroad station, both of them so tender and beautiful. We embrase to each other and cried so long. When we came to the house, there was my mother, moving fast from the door to the street with a sun-yellow dress on and the big face cover with so many wrinkles. I leave the car and I run towards her and I embrase her and she embrase me and she began to scream between tears. "How different you are? What happened with your voice? Why these clothes that look like a boy? You are not my Mari." And she began to shake and I felt die. Slowly she became into herself or into the situation I do not know and at once she naked me and gave me my old clothes that she kept here from five years ago. And I stood enough docile and smiling and silent and terible frighten and so she felt and she said me that I became her daughter again.

We drank mate and we ate something and they show me all around the house that looked to me so different in those moments, there was two days that I could not sleep before to come home and I stood another two without can.

My sister so beautiful and so beloved for me and sometime so far way and maybe angry for me to have left her so long But our

closeness will grow, slow and solid I know. My relationship with my father go easy and deep. He is so close to the earth and the sky. And my mother, this her of me, this sensitive and torment woman who is pitiless with herself. Her I love and I fear, no one know how much. Only to love her while I walk the road to reaffirmate myself just like I am and I want to be more and more.

Judith, I want to tell you a small dream I had. I was walking on the street of a small village, like the village of my parents. Two women came out of a small dress shop and beckon me to come in. But I felt me resistance to go and I turn my head and your smiling face was there and you were calling to me that the carnival was here and that we could to ride on the Tiger lillies if we went right then. I walked towards you with doubt and fear but I embraced you to me and rested my head on your belly and I felt some kind of a perfect lightness like joy.

Your letter came just now to me, the letter you sent three months ago and in the pages were the beautiful winter leaves.

I send you this little picture of the beautiful pinginos, from the south of my country. They are innocent and proud and tender and holy like you. Like us. Our feelings of those first days never will to be lost. Tell Josh that my mama have a small tourtle, with purple and orange flowers on her back. Amazonas, Magdalena, Mississippi, Missouri, Hudson River all bring my love to you, Judith, and to Josh too, who I love so like my brother I never had.

Mari